How to bridge the 'three islands':

The future of European military co-operation

By Bence Németh

After the 2008 Financial Crisis, many European countries have started to intensify their thinking about co-operation in military capability development, particularly with their regional partners.[1] The rationale behind this closer military co-operation is that European countries want to maintain and develop their military capabilities, but do not want to spend highly on defence. Analysts and scholars have drawn attention to the need for higher levels of European military co-operation for years. They have argued that in international comparisons, the Member States of the European Union spend heavily on their militaries but spend poorly, because they do not co-ordinate their military development, procurement, training, and so on. This has led to scarcities in certain areas and over-capacities in others. However, the willingness for deeper military co-operation has become apparent since the financial crisis hit, and the scarcity of money has accelerated

different kinds of projects. The most important examples of real military co-operation are the following:

- **NORDEFCO**: While the Nordic countries have a long history of co-operation in military affairs, it accelerated after 2008, when Finland, Norway and Sweden intensified their collaboration. One year later all Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – decided to found one comprehensive structure. Known as Nordic Defence Co-operation (NORDEFCO), this covers almost the whole spectrum of their military sectors, in order to achieve cost-effectiveness and enhanced operational capabilities.

- The **British-French alliance**: In November 2010, France and the United Kingdom signed two treaties (letters of intent) on co-operation in strategically crucial fields. The first treaty between London and Paris is an 'overarching defence co-operation treaty', which introduced initiatives on aircraft carrier collaboration; the sharing of training, resources and maintenance; the establishment of a division-size joint expeditionary force; and military-industrial co-operation.[2] The second treaty, which focuses on nuclear collaboration, provides the possibility for the two European nuclear powers to share their nuclear research and testing information with one another.

- **Central European co-operation**: In early 2011, the Directors of Defence Policy of six Central European countries – Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia – agreed to begin to map the possible areas of co-operation where their countries could pool and share military capabilities, and also agreed to coordinate their standpoints on different defence policy and planning issues. They have already met several times during 2011 and expert level negotiations have begun on certain issues.

Of course, cross border military co-operation in Europe is not a new phenomenon, and many multinational frameworks have been initiated over the last two decades (e.g. the British-Dutch Amphibious Group; the Franco-German Brigade; the Hungarian-Romanian Peacekeeping Battalion; Belgian-Dutch naval co-operation; the Baltic Defence College; Strategic Airlift Capability; the European Air Transport Command, and so on). Importantly, this cross-border co-operation has been mostly one-sided, covering only one area; the military co-operation established after the financial crisis, however, is – or was intended to be – both multi-dimensional and permanently-structured at one and the same time.

Efforts for deeper military co-operation have started not only in regional and bilateral frameworks, but also through the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance. Independently from the financial crisis, the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force on 1st December 2009, provided the opportunity for the creation of 'Permanent Structured Co-operation' for 'those Member States whose military capabilities fulfil higher criteria and which have made more binding commitments to one another in this area with a view to the most demanding missions.'[3] Yet, despite a huge amount of negotiation, the Member States have not yet reached consensus on the details surrounding permanent structured co-operation. Instead, the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance have recently established new mechanisms concerning military capability development, respectively 'Pooling and Sharing' and 'Smart Defence', to indicate the same idea, namely, establishing closer co-operation (e.g., the sharing and pooling of capabilities, role sharing, pooling through acquisition, and so on) between certain Member States to sustain or develop more effective military capabilities.

However, the aforenamed regional military co-operation shows that many Member States often still prefer to work bilaterally or regionally than through the European Union and/or the Atlantic Alliance. Of course, this does not mean that they do not co-operate within these institutions; what is does mean is that there are significant areas where increasingly more states consider either the European Union or the Atlantic Alliance inappropriate for multinational military co-operation. For instance, many Nordic countries see these two organisations – especially the European Union – as too complicated, large and slow.[4] Furthermore, both British and French officials are dissatisfied with the progress of the Common Security and Defence Policy with regards to capability development, and believe that bilateral military collaboration will work much better among 'natural partners' than co-operation within multilateral institutions.[5] The smaller Central European states have realised that they have many similar problems and most of the current institutionalised initiatives are not appropriate to solve them, thus they need a closer co-operation to find out whether they could solve their common problems together.

Although these 'three islands' of co-operation – NORDEFCO, the enhanced British-French alliance and Central European co-operation – are still relatively new, they have already provided some important initial lessons.[6] These are:

1. Similar needs and problems matter more than institutions

The participating states of the 'three islands' co-operate with their regional partners irrespectively of whether they are members of the same military-related organisations. For instance, with regards to NORDEFCO, Norway and Iceland are members of the At-

lantic Alliance; Finland and Sweden are Member States of the European Union; and Denmark belongs of both organisations, although it opts-out of the Common Security and Defence Policy. Concerning Central European co-operation, Austria is a Member State of the European Union; Croatia is a member of the Atlantic Alliance (and will join the European Union in 2013); while the other four countries are part of both organisations. So many European countries use only partly the frameworks and mechanisms of the Atlantic Alliance and European Union for enhancing their co-operation in capability development, and often search for partners on a neighbourly basis. This clearly shows the hardship of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance in attracting their members to co-operate in their frameworks, and also points to the diverging interests and problems of groups of European states concerning military-related issues.

One of the most important reasons for this phenomenon is the capability gaps between European states and thus the different needs and possibilities of their armed forces, which are hardly solvable in the framework of big, heterogeneous multinational organisations. While for instance France and the United Kingdom have a problem in developing new aircraft carriers to maintain an appropriate capability to project force overseas,[7] many Central European countries struggle to procure and/or maintain modern fighter jets for air policy tasks.[8] These different needs could give the opportunity for co-operation between the smaller Central European states on air policing and between France and the United Kingdom on sharing aircraft carriers. However, they also point to the phenomenon that capability gap can actually hinder collaboration, and identical capability needs can provide a better ground for co-operation than institutional membership.

2. Coherence between high and low politics is the key driving force

Many analysts have highlighted the importance of the co-operating countries' similarities regarding their strategic culture, force structure, size and quality of their armed forces, equipment, vehicles, and so on. Indeed these elements can make co-operation smoother, but – besides the aforementioned similar capability needs – the coherence between the intentions of politicians and the military are vital regarding multinational capability development. If this coherence does not exist, the co-operation will face persistent difficulties, independently of the co-operating armed forces' similarities.

Some have already warned that European defence ministries have 'highly effective "immune systems"' towards new ideas,[9] and 'experts have no sympathy with doing things differently.'[10] Namely, if politicians agree on co-operation, bureaucracies can still slow down the process and provide such analyses that emphasise the difficulties instead of solutions. Such fears are apparent, especially concerning British-French co-

operation, where the heads of state agreed on the collaboration, and then have to press the defence establishment to execute the agreed initiatives. In this top-down process, the politicians are convinced about the necessity of co-operation but the defence ministries are not necessarily in full agreement with it. However, in regard to NORDEFCO and Central European co-operation, the situation is quite the opposite. These cases have been bottom-up processes, which were initiated by the respective defence ministries, thus the military establishments in these countries are often more convinced about the usefulness of co-operation than high politics. In principle, and in general, high politics demands co-operation, but problems can arise when concrete decisions have to be taken which may need sacrifices from the participating countries. Accordingly, at times the defence establishment attempts to persuade the politicians that co-operation on capability development is useful, economically beneficial and inevitable, despite the fact that it can lead to more interdependencies.

3. A full spectrum of capabilities will make co-operation more effective

Countries intending to maintain a full spectrum (or near full spectrum) of military capabilities have a greater chance of successful collaboration than countries that have already addressed their lack of resources by specialisation and cutting certain military capabilities. For instance, both France and the United Kingdom are committed to possess a full spectrum of armed forces and have found many opportunities for military collaboration. In regard to NORDEFCO, Sweden, Norway and Finland boosted Nordic co-operation in 2008 to solve their lack of resources by co-operation rather than cutting complete capacities. But Denmark – like most of the smaller members of the Atlantic Alliance – has already abandoned whole capabilities; thus Copenhagen is the least interested in NORDEFCO among the participating states.[11] Similarly, many smaller Central European countries have concentrated on the development of different niche capabilities – encouraged among others by the Atlantic Alliance – meaning that they have also lost many capabilities over the last few years. Now they face hardships to find proper areas of co-operation.

The reason for this phenomenon is probability: if countries have a full spectrum of capabilities, they can choose from a wider range of areas to co-operate. Contrarily, countries which have already lost many capacities, and focused on niche capabilities and role specialisation, have fewer options for co-operation. Understandably, they tend to focus only on their remaining capabilities for co-operation, because they got used to – or learnt to live without – their lost capabilities. Furthermore, because of political considerations, many capabilities are not always suitable for international co-operation. This is less problematic for states maintaining a full spectrum of capabilities because of their

greater options, but this narrows further the already fewer possibilities regarding co-operation for countries which previously cut whole capacities. Accordingly, countries focusing on role specialisation and niche capabilities have less chance to fit in with others.

4. Previous co-operation helps

Former military co-operation among participating countries can provide a fruitful environment for the stimulation of new collaboration on capability development. Indeed, new military collaboration can be seen as the natural continuation of former activity and this fosters its acceptance by both decision makers and the public. Equally, referring to former co-operation – particularly when successful – can even provide 'firepower' and a sort of 'legitimacy' to the proponents of any current co-operation. For example, NORDEFCO builds on the the military synergies between Nordic countries during the Cold War, as well as the Nordic passport union and the successful co-operation – after the Second World War – on labour migration and cultural exchange. Likewise, the nearly century-old alliance between France and the United Kingdom has helped reinforce further military co-operation, with each country drawing off its affinities with the other.

How might the 'three islands' be bridged?

The lessons provided by the 'three islands' of co-operation – NORDEFCO, the British-French alliance and Central European co-operation – are also useful for both current and future co-operation. They highlight that there is not a single European country – not even the biggest military spenders – that can develop and maintain, any longer, a full spectrum of military capabilities. This means that the scarcity of available resources will probably press countries to solve their defence budget constrains by abandoning yet more capabilities and/or by accelerating additional European military collaboration. However, at one and the same time, comprehensive co-operation requires for there to be a critical mass of the same or similar capabilities among the co-operating states. Without the appropriate level of the same capabilities, governments cannot exploit the potential for progressively deeper collaboration. Thus, an over-emphasis on role sharing and the development of niche capabilities by particular states could even hinder co-operation. Accordingly, and critically, participating states must find a balance between abandoning and maintaining capabilities in order to still be able to co-operate across a wide spectrum. This mandates better co-ordination among their military planning sys-

tems and a more effective usage of current structures like the European Defence Agency and the Atlantic Alliance's agencies.[12]

Lastly, the different needs and capability levels of the 'three islands' means that co-operation will advance in different directions and at different speeds. After all, in many ways, Britain and France want at present to share some specific strategic capabilities, which are somewhat different to those of the Nordic states or the countries of Central Europe (e.g. costly force projection assets). Consequentially, the members of each of the 'three islands' will put different emphasis on their co-operation regarding capability development. The European Union and Atlantic Alliance must therefore be used to ensure that a common understanding of capability needs can be constituted, while preventing – simultaneously – the 'three islands' from tacking off into potentially three different directions.

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Notes

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[2] Benoit Gomis, 'Franco-British Defence and Security Treaties: Entente While it Lasts?', *Programme Paper*, London: Chatham House, 2011, p. 5.

[3] Treaty of Lisbon, Article 42.6.

[4] Håkon Lunde Saxi, 'Nordic defence co-operation after the Cold War', *Oslo Files on Defence and Security 1/2011*, Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2011, p. 28.

[5] Ben Jones, 'Franco-British military co-operation: a new engine for European defence?', *Occasional Paper 88*, Paris: European Institute for Security Studies, 2011, p. 8 and p. 19.

[6] The term 'islands of co-operation' was used first by Tomas Valasek. See: Tomas Valasek, *Surviving austerity: The case for a new approach to EU military collaboration* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2011).

[7] Jones, 'Franco-British military co-operation', p. 25.

[8] Xymena Kurowska, 'Central European cooperation', *Washington Forum Debate*, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 29th September 2011.

[9] Jones, 'Franco-British military co-operation', p. 33.

[10] Nick Witney, 'How to Stop the Demilitarisation of Europe', *ECFR Policy Brief*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2011, p. 9.

[11] Saxi, 'Nordic defence co-operation after the Cold War', p. 59.

[12] By Summer 2012, the former fourteen agencies of the Atlantic Alliance are going to be re-grouped into four agencies (a Procurement Agency, Support Agency, Standardisation Agency and Communications and Information Agency).